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978-0-521-89944-4 - The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

“First place in the population’s concerns”: The Politics of Everyday Life and the Second World War in France

Charged with monitoring public opinion during the Second World War, prefects in the rural Limousin region of central France regularly reported “supply difficulties still hold first place in the population’s concerns.”¹ The Vichy regime also employed the *Direction des Contrôles Techniques* in a further attempt to gauge the public’s mood. Inspectors opened and read the letters French residents sent each other and then relayed the compiled information to government officials. Complaints about the inadequacy of daily rations and supplies in general appeared in around 5 percent of the letters authorities read in 1941, and just days before the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944, 24 percent of the recorded opinions mentioned shortages. Even though these numbers may appear modest, provisioning occupied letter writers more than any other issue facing the public throughout the course of the war.² The

¹ Archives Nationales (hereafter AN) F 1c III – 1197. Rapport mensuel d’information du 1er avril au 30 avril 1942 (May 4, 1942). See also reports dated March 4, 1942, April 5, 1942, June 5, 1942, August 5, 1942, etc. For the Corrèze, see similar comments in AN F 1c III – 1147. See reports from May 2, 1941, May 31, 1941, and December 1943. For the Creuse, see AN F 1c III – 1150, reports dated March 1, 1941, and October 2, 1941. The prefect for the Limoges region also noted the general preoccupation with food in his reports. See AN F 1c III – 1200, reports dated June 15, 1942, July 11, 1942, and September 6, 1942, for examples. John F. Sweets notes that in the fall of 1941, the minister of the interior wrote that life “is dominated essentially – certain Prefects go so far as to write in their reports ‘uniquely’ – by material preoccupations always concerning the same objects: food, heating, clothing, shoes.” Quoted and translated in John F. Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France: The French under Nazi Occupation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 165.

² Prisoners of war, the most-mentioned topic after food, usually figured in less than 2 percent of all intercepted letters. For 1941, see AN F7 14926 – Direction des Contrôles Techniques. Secrétariat d’Etat à la Guerre – Cabinet du Ministre – Service Civil des Contrôles Techniques. For 1944, see Inspection générale/régionale de Limoges. Commission de St. Amand Montrond. Rapport Statistique Hebdomadaire. Période du 25 au 31 Mai 1944 (June 3, 1944).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

hardships of extreme scarcity also deeply mark the memoirs, testimonies, and memories of ordinary people living in France during the war. Claire Hsu Accomando's account of her childhood in German-occupied Normandy begins with a description of her mother's battle to get the children to eat rutabagas, a staple of their diet, yet again. In an interview conducted fifty-five years after the war's end, Liane Reif-Lehrer vividly remembered the humiliation of being forced to beg for bread when her family's ration coupons ran out. The duty fell to the 5-year-old because bakers in Limoges found it hard to resist the cute little girl with curly brown hair.³

Most studies, however, have ignored the day-to-day political effects of shortages in France between 1939 and 1944. The harsh realities of daily life often serve as the context for political and ideological studies rather than as an object of examination.⁴ I reverse this perspective to demonstrate the ways in which food became a personal *and* a political issue during the Second World War. Shortages framed daily interactions, influenced governmental and personal decisions, and shaped public attitudes. After the state assumed responsibility for the distribution of goods through rationing and price controls, every attempt to circumvent the restrictions could be – and usually was – considered a political act. The intersection of abstract ideologies with physical realities led to creative and often-contradictory individual responses that directly affected the French political and social structure in ways that made shortages more than a background concern.

The pursuit of ever-decreasing, precious goods forced a variety of strangers to interact on a daily basis, creating tensions and alliances between individuals as a result of material concerns. An examination of these local-level dealings reveals the ways in which shortages shaped, created, and defined interactions between different social, religious, and cultural

³ Claire Hsu Accomando, *Love and Rutabaga: A Remembrance of the War Years* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), ix–x. See also Bonnie G. Smith's *Confessions of a Concierge: Madame Lucie's History of Twentieth-Century France* (New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 1985); *Journal de Louis Aron, directeur de La Maison Israélite de Refuge pour l'enfance Neuilly-sur-Seine 1939, Crocq (Creuse) 1939–1942, Chaumont (Creuse) 1942–1944* edited by Serge Klarsfeld with Annette Zaidman (Paris: Association “Les Fils et Filles des Déportés Juifs de France” and “The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation,” 1998); and Isaac Levendel, *Not the Germans Alone: A Son's Search for the Truth of Vichy* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999) for additional examples of the strong presence of shortages in personal accounts. Liane Reif-Lehrer, interview with the author (August 7, 2000). See also Liane Reif-Lehrer, videotaped testimony, Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter USHMM) RG-50-030*186.

⁴ See for example Chapter 1 “War, Occupation, and Society” in Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89944-4 - The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

groups during the war. The wealthy continued to fare better than workers or civil servants living on a fixed income as prices for basic necessities soared and the black market flourished. The wartime shortages also dramatically changed traditional social structures and inverted concepts of privilege as peasants, with their direct access to meat, vegetables, milk, and eggs, claimed a greater standing in society. But even more than socioeconomic status, one's position as a foreigner, "undesirable,"⁵ or stranger in a community could affect access to food despite the equality implied by rationing and the state's elaborate system of tickets, cards, and registration. An individual's ability to negotiate the parallel economic world increasingly depended upon personal relationships with those who had access to material goods rather than usual provisioning practices. People on the margins of society such as evacuees, refugees, Jews, and Gypsies had fewer connections and thus fewer opportunities for extra-legal access to food and other supplies.

The experiences of these outsiders are central to understanding Vichy politics and policies and thus form the backbone of this book. Examining the daily interactions between natives and outsiders in the Limousin as shaped by material concerns reveal both strains and alliances in society. A full understanding of the implications of shortages for politics, communities, and families in France during the war requires a comparative, local approach. Therefore, each chapter focuses on a specific group considered to be foreigners, undesirables, or strangers in the Limousin in the attempt both to understand daily life in a specific place and to explore more broadly the ways men and women opposed and/or supported the Vichy regime, developed coping strategies, and related to others in their daily struggle for survival. Studying outsiders in rural communities more generally – Alsatian evacuees, city dwellers in search of food, non-Jewish foreign refugees, Jewish children – allows us to determine the extent to which the treatment of officially persecuted groups was unique or part of a larger phenomenon of materially influenced exclusion.

The general history of France during World War II is now well-known.⁶ What is less familiar is the history of daily life during the war and the effects

⁵ During the war years, the Vichy government designated certain groups as 'undesirable.' Throughout the text, I use the word without quotation marks, but it should be understood that the use of the term refers to Vichy's interpretation and view of these groups.

⁶ Two recent syntheses of the Vichy period are Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation* (New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

Cambridge University Press

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Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of scarcity on the social fabric. The political history of the war – the French army’s swift defeat, the German occupation, the division of France into zones, the establishment of the collaborationist Vichy regime, and the implementation of its exclusionary National Revolution – cannot be separated from the period’s material history. Examining the politics of everyday life, which combines the ideological and the material, thus helps explain the relationship between the public and the French state during the war, clarifies changes in public opinion, and demonstrates how the exclusion of foreigners, Gypsies, and Jews from the national community occurred on a daily basis.

WAR AND SHORTAGES

Shortages of food, clothing, primary resources, and heating materials began with the declaration of war against Germany on September 3, 1939, and eventually touched everyone in France. One could avoid becoming involved in politics, but one could not avoid shortages. In the war’s early months, the government of the Third Republic diverted supplies from the home front to the mobilized soldiers protecting France’s borders.⁷ After the French army’s swift defeat and the signing of an armistice in June 1940, Nazi officials demanded that the defeated nation provide agricultural and industrial products to Germany as part of the rational exploitation of the country’s economic resources. Furthermore, the northern and coastal portions of France directly occupied by German troops produced the majority of the country’s coal, steel, textiles, cereals, milk, sugar, and meat.⁸ The terms of the armistice also required Marshal Philippe Pétain’s government to pay occupation costs at the rate of twenty million Reichsmarks per day. To fulfill these obligations, additional goods were diverted to Germany. By the end of the war, 2.4 million metric tons of wheat, 891,000 metric tons of meat, and 1.4 million hectoliters of milk had been transferred from France to Germany.⁹

⁷ The first official restrictions were introduced in November 1939 in order to provide more meat for the mobilized troops. See Dominique Veillon, *Vivre et survivre en France 1939–1947* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 1995), 36–7, and Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France 1939–1948: Choices and Constraints* (London: Longman, 1999), 50.

⁸ Polymeris Voglis, “Surviving Hunger: Life in the Cities and the Countryside during the Occupation” in *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini: Daily Life in Occupied Europe* edited by Robert Gildea, Olivier Wieviorka, and Anette Warring (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 17, 20.

⁹ Statistics cited in Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for Children: World War II, Youth Crime, and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 54.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89944-4 - The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

As a consequence of the resulting shortages, only 25 percent of the population had sufficient amounts of food, and 55 percent of the French people found provisioning difficult or nearly impossible.¹⁰

The Vichy government introduced rationing in September 1940 in order to help fulfill German requisitions and to redistribute basic necessities among all French residents. Ration cards provided 1,800 calories a day per person when they first appeared, although the League of Nations estimated that the average adult needed 2,400 to 2,800 daily calories. The number of calories provided by ration cards fell to 1,700 by 1942 and went as low as 900 calories per day for adults as shortages worsened over the course of the war.¹¹ In principle, age and occupation determined the only differences in amounts of certain goods allocated to individuals. Adults between the ages of 21 and 70 (Category A) received a standard ration, although the amount of goods considered standard varied over the course of the war.¹² Workers who performed heavy labor and fell within the adult age range (Category T) received tickets for supplemental amounts of bread, meat, fats, and wine. Agricultural laborers (Category C) and rural residents were expected to provide for themselves from their land and therefore received a reduced ration. The elderly older than age 70 (Category V) also received less bread than adults, but had a right to slightly more sugar and milk. Children younger than 21 were divided into four different categories

¹⁰ Michel Cépède, *Agriculture et Alimentation en France durant la IIe Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Editions M-Th. Génin, 1961), 372. Cépède estimates that 25 percent of the population, primarily rural farmers, had sufficient food; 20 percent, usually rural, nonagricultural inhabitants, were less well-off but still had relatively easy access to necessary products; 25 percent found provisioning difficult, especially those living in smaller urban areas or people without the means to supplement their rations; and 30 percent residing in large urban areas were extremely disadvantaged.

¹¹ Cépède, *Agriculture et Alimentation*, p. 151. Category V (the elderly) received even less at the lowest point. Sarah Fishman estimates that “people lacked one-quarter to one-half the necessary daily calories.” See Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940–1945* (New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 60 and footnote 16.

¹² As an example, the ration cards distributed in September 1940 came with coupons allowing the following amounts of food: Coupon 1: 350 grams of bread per day; Coupon 2: 500 grams of sugar per month; Coupon 3: 300 grams of coffee blend per month (except children); Coupon 4: 250 grams of pasta per week; Coupon 5: 100 grams of rice per month (children only); Coupon 6: 50 grams of cheese per week; Coupon 7: 100 grams of fatty materials per week; Coupon 8: 360 grams per week of beef, pork, charcuterie, and meat conserves; Coupon 9: 125 grams of soap per month; and Coupon 10: milk. See “Les nouvelles mesures de rationnement,” *Le Courrier de la Creuse* 65 (September 22, 1940): 1. Variations were published in local newspapers as well as in the *Journal Officiel de l’Etat Français*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89944-4 - The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

based on age (Categories E, J1, J2, and J3), each of which received some supplemental goods such as sugar, chocolate, jam, and milk.

A ration card did not guarantee that an individual would receive the amount of goods to which he or she was entitled, however. Increasing shortages meant that items disappeared from shelves before everyone's needs were fulfilled. The imprisonment of millions of French soldiers and the physical disruption resulting from the war effort decreased domestic agricultural production significantly. At the same time, British blockades deprived the country of coal supplies and other imports such as coffee, sugar, wool, and cotton. The Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942 further limited French access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The Germans' subsequent occupation of the "free" zone led to even greater housing shortages and increased competition for scarce items. Allied bombings destroyed even more residences, farmland, and industry. Prohibitive prices also prevented some families from obtaining the items they needed or wanted despite their ration tickets. The search for adequate food supplies occupied every French family's time, drained its income, and became a daily obsession.

Under such conditions, the creation of a parallel economy was inevitable. Individuals turned to the gray market, the black market, and the "Système D" when the government consistently failed to deliver promised goods. On the gray market, items were sold at a price moderately above the legal price, usually to friends or family members. The government tolerated such exchanges as a means to supplement meager rations. The black market had rare goods at a significant mark-up and was available to those with the economic resources and connections to black marketeers. Vichy defined the black market as any "transaction, action, or economic exchange that constitutes an infraction against a state regulation." The proliferation of regulations related to provisioning under Vichy meant that black market activities included, but were not limited to selling or buying items above the legal price; hoarding, selling, or buying items without the proper exchange of ration tickets; and using counterfeit ration documents.¹³ The term "Système D" was short for the *système débrouillard*, or making do. Resourcefulness and the ability to make the most of relationships or the goods one had were valued. Such activities could include gardening, raising rabbits and chickens, purchasing goods on the black market, bartering, or making trips to the countryside. These survival tactics often included technically illegal exchanges and challenged the government's authority on a daily basis.

¹³ Paul Sanders, *Histoire du marché noir 1940–1946* (Paris: Perrin, 2001), 14.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89944-4 - The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

Scholars have explored shortages' political implications in different time periods and other countries in greater depth than examinations of France during the Second World War. Studies of scarcity and the Great War of 1914–1918 often emphasize the political nature of everyday events in total wars in order to challenge “still-dominant assumptions regarding the nature of politics itself as representing a narrow terrain of activity, largely separated from the rest of everyday life, practiced only at particular moments and often by limited segments of society.”¹⁴ Scholars utilizing this broader definition of politics have convincingly demonstrated the political importance of material concerns. In World War I Germany, changes in the relationship between state and society based on the intersection of food, identity, and politics played an important part in the German revolution of November 1918. Scarcity also directly contributed to the Habsburg Empire's collapse and the Russian tsar's downfall.¹⁵ During the Great War, the belligerent nations' governments asked citizens to sacrifice in order to sustain the war effort, but some governments' failure to respond to citizens' material needs ultimately undermined their authority, leading to military defeat and governmental collapse. In France, restrictions, prohibitive prices, and the rationing of basic foodstuffs did not begin until 1917, leading at least one historian to conclude that “inconveniences were rarely insupportable [and] the economic problems there were did not provoke major reversals of public opinion or changes in behaviour.”¹⁶ The French local and national governments' ability to ease economic and provisioning problems prevented any loss of legitimacy.

If the French Third Republic managed to survive the Great War's material difficulties relatively unscathed, the same cannot be said for the Vichy regime during World War II. The differences between the conflicts, both

¹⁴ Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁵ Davis, *Home Fires Burning*. Davis also addresses this theme of political legitimacy in “Food Scarcity and the Empowerment of the Female Consumer in World War I Berlin” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* edited by Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and in her chapter with Thierry Bonzon, “Feeding the Cities” in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919* edited by Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For a study of the impact of shortages on the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, see Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On Russia, see Barbara Alpern Engel, “Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I” *Journal of Modern History* 69 (December 1997): 696–721.

¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People* translated by Arnold Pomerans and introduced by Jay Winter (Leamington Spa, Heidelberg, Dover, New Hampshire: Berg, 1985), 149.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89944-4 - *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers*

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

physical and ideological, help explain how the Third Republic managed to maintain public support while Marshal Pétain's government increasingly lost it. During the First World War, women and the men left behind managed to maintain agricultural production, and the nation continued to have reasonable access to imported goods. Even though prices for basic necessities climbed steadily throughout the war, bread, the nation's food staple, was not officially rationed until January 29, 1918.¹⁷ France during the Second World War experienced rationing and restrictions of many products within months of the war's start. The material difficulties worsened throughout the war, and the problems lacked an acceptable justification. Civilians during the Great War compared their hardships to those of the men in the trenches and found life on the home front relatively manageable. People thus felt a moral responsibility to endure the material shortages at home as long as the men at the front had to face the horrors of war.

Vichy also attempted to equate material shortages with a moral imperative, but, as the following pages will show, without the same success. The actual fighting of the Second World War lasted only six weeks, and civilians found it difficult to accept sacrifices for the abstract "good of the nation" or in order to sustain the German war effort. With the end of fighting, focus shifted to the everyday ideological battles of the new regime's National Revolution. The home front and internal politics thus took on greater significance making a study of shortages and their political implications imperative. Instead of supporting the government and its rationing policies, French residents manipulated the regime's ideology to fulfill material needs, thereby challenging the government's authority within months of its inception. Despite these problems, the Vichy regime managed to survive the war years, which leads to the question of how. Answering this question requires an examination of daily life on the local level.

Hunger was a constant feature of daily life, but the extent of shortages and reactions to the restrictions varied considerably across the country and across time. German occupation led to an immediate drop in agricultural production across Europe due to requisitions, labor shortages, and war damage to countries' infrastructure. French production of grain, potatoes, and meat fell dramatically between 1939 and 1940. By 1943, the amount of land planted with grain was 1.4 million hectares less than it had been in the years before the war. French ration cards consistently provided fewer

¹⁷ See Bonzon and Davis, "Feeding the Cities," p. 318. The authors note that there are no historical works on how the Great War affected food supplies and consumption patterns in French cities.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89944-4 - The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

calories than did cards in Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, Norway, and the Baltic countries despite the fact that France was the largest prewar producer of agricultural goods in Western Europe. The amount of meat and fats provided weekly in France was also lower than that in other countries, and the difference in rations was especially noticeable in the amounts allotted to workers.¹⁸ The French, however, never faced famine and starvation like the residents of countries such as the Netherlands and Greece.¹⁹

The division of France into different zones (occupied, unoccupied, forbidden, and annexed territories), fuel shortages, and inefficient food distribution contributed to provisioning difficulties. (See Map 1.) Food sitting in port cities like Le Havre often rotted before it could be delivered to hungry urban dwellers.²⁰ Residents of the large sea port cities of Nantes and Saint-Nazaire in the occupied zone suffered because they were cut off from overseas goods and found it difficult to import food from the surrounding countryside.²¹ City dwellers from Paris and other northern cities often ventured to agricultural regions such as Normandy or the Loire Valley in search of food. Those without rural connections or financial means spent hours each day waiting in line to purchase rationed goods.²²

Shortages were worse in large cities, where the populace relied on products brought in from the countryside, and in the south of France, which produced three-quarters of the country's wine, but little wheat, butter, beef, or sugar. The region around Nîmes near the Mediterranean coast suffered from shortages as early as the summer of 1940. Dependent upon viticulture, the area received most of its produce from other departments, and a commercial blockage of goods coming from other regions in July 1940 meant residents were unable to find essential supplies.²³ Around Clermont-Ferrand, an important agricultural region in the unoccupied zone, food production fell by at least 30 percent, evidence of malnutrition increased, and cases of tuberculosis were twice their prewar levels.²⁴ Many other cities felt the

¹⁸ Voglis, "Surviving Hunger," pp. 20–6.

¹⁹ Famine in these countries resulted from the course of the war and the Nazis' racial ideology and economic exploitation methods. See Voglis, "Surviving Hunger."

²⁰ Cited in Vinen, *The Unfree French*, p. 221.

²¹ Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation 1940–1945* (London, Basingstoke, and Oxford: Macmillan, 2002), 113.

²² On queues, see Veillon, *Vivre et survivre*, pp. 127–32; Diamond, *Women and the Second World War*, pp. 53–55; and Paula Schwartz, "The Politics of Food and Gender in Occupied Paris," *Modern & Contemporary France* 7 (February 1999): 36–9.

²³ Robert Zaretsky, *Nîmes at War: Religion, Politics, and Public Opinion in the Gard, 1938–1944* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 76–7.

²⁴ Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France*, p. 15.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89944-4 - The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers

Shannon L. Fogg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

adverse health effects created by penury: Paris saw its mortality rate rise during the war by 24 percent, Lyon by 29 percent, and Marseilles by 57 percent.²⁵ As residents became desperate for food, polycultural regions in the unoccupied zone, like the Limousin, became increasingly important as sources of food. Thus, the Limousin is an ideal location for the study of the politics of daily life during the Second World War.

THE LIMOUSIN AT WAR

The Limousin region rarely takes center stage in French history. Made up of the departments of the Creuse, Corrèze, and Haute-Vienne, the region is rural and sparsely populated with most of its inhabitants living on farms or in small hamlets and bourgs scattered throughout the rolling countryside. (See Maps 2 and 3.) Limoges, the area's major city, is known internationally for its fine porcelain, but the region's main focus is agriculture.²⁶ During the Second World War, the Limousin attracted more attention due in part to the geography that usually keeps the region isolated. The mountains of the Massif Central, which cover portions of the Corrèze, the southeastern Haute-Vienne, and the southern Creuse, helped foster the growth of rural guerrilla groups known as the maquis. As a result of the presence of the Resistance in the region, the Limousin was also the site of some of the worst Nazi atrocities in France during the Second World War. German troops moving through the region in response to increased Resistance activity hanged 99 men in the city of Tulle (Corrèze) and deported another 149 on June 9, 1944, in reprisal for attacks. The next day, the troops entered the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in the Haute-Vienne, rounded up the village's residents, divided the men from the women and children, and began a massacre: 642 men, women, and children died that day, either falling under the Germans' bullets or burning to death when the entire village was set ablaze.²⁷

²⁵ Vinen, *The Unfree French*, p. 227.

²⁶ Limoges served as the Limousin's regional capital before and during the war; however, the armistice signed between France and Germany on June 22, 1940, changed the structural administration of the region. In addition to the three usual departments of the Creuse, the Corrèze, and the Haute-Vienne, the Indre and portions of the Dordogne, the Vienne, the Charente, the Indre-et-Loire, the Loir-et-Cher, and the Cher, departments now divided by the demarcation line between occupied and unoccupied France, comprised the Limoges region.

²⁷ On Oradour-sur-Glane, see Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999).